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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: PGOV PREL LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: EXPLOSION KILLS MARCH 14 PARLIAMENTARIAN

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d) .

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) March 14 MP Walid Eido was killed June 14 in what sources tell us was a targeted bombing on Beirut's waterfront corniche. Eido, an outspoken opponent of Syrian interference in Lebanon, was a member of Saad Hariri's Future Movement and a close personal friend of Social Progressive Party leader Walid Jumblatt. Eido's death will have serious political, morale, and security ramifications. In particular, it further erodes March 14's parliamentary majority to just 68 out of 128 deputies -- only three more than the 65 needed to win a simple majority vote, including a vote of confidence for the Siniora cabinet. End summary.

¶2. (C) March 14 MP Walid Eido, a member of Saad Hariri's Future Movement, along with his eldest son, two bodyguards, and at least eight others, died in an explosion in Beirut's waterfront Manara district late in the afternoon of June 13. Progressive Socialist Party leader and Eido's close personal friend Walid Jumblatt called the Ambassador shortly after the explosion to inform him that Eido was the target of the bombing and had been killed. ISF and MOD sources confirmed to Embassy officers shortly thereafter that Eido and his eldest son, along with two bodyguards, died in the blast, the result of a bomb placed in a car along the route Eido was traveling. (Note: Similar techniques were used in the December 2005 assassination of anti-Syrian March 14 MP Gebran Tueni. End note.)

¶3. (C) This is the fifth MP killed starting with the February 14, 2005 assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri and the first political assassination since the November 21, 2006 killing of MP Pierre Gemayel. Eido, like all of the Lebanese leaders who have been killed since the Hariri assassination, worked hard to promote democracy and stability in Lebanon and was a staunch critic of Syrian interference in Lebanon, often appearing on weekend talk shows to voice his opposition. Eido, a Sunni, joined the Future Movement and became stridently anti-Syrian following Hariri's assassination, recently voicing harsh criticism of the six opposition Ministers who resigned their posts last December in an effort to derail the GOL's efforts to establish a Special Tribunal. Indeed, as our March 14 contacts all note, Eido's death is a blatant affront to the international community's decision to move ahead with the Tribunal.

MARCH 14 LOSING ITS GRIP ON PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY

14. (C) Eido's assassination is an extremely serious development. Because of deaths, assassinations, and intimidation, March 14's parliamentary majority has shrunk from 72 to 68 since the 2005 election (assuming party discipline and no more defections) -- just three votes more than the 65 required to win a simple majority vote in the 128-member house. March 14 would have no difficulty filling the seats of either Eido or Gemayel in the event of new elections. However, judging by the experience of Gemayel's death, President Lahoud probably will continue to refuse to sign the decrees allowing elections to be held, saying they come from an "illegal" government. If March 14 continues to lose deputies, it will have a difficult time electing a President of its choice in the September 25 election. There is even a risk that March 14 could lose a vote of confidence in the Siniora cabinet, should parliament be convened once March 8-Aoun leaders decide it is in their interest to do so.

15. (C) March 14 politicians will certainly rally around Eido's death in the short-term -- he was an old-school politician liked by all (though, some would argue, not entirely untainted by corruption, particularly regarding his financial dealings with the Hariris). However, the longer term impact is potentially quite damaging. Those sitting on the fence will be all the more reluctant to side with March 14 if it looks like it is losing support (even if only through assassinations), and this in turn will have spillover effects on the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and other institutions.

16. (C) The security ramifications are equally worrying. Eido was a Sunni killed in West Beirut, a predominantly Muslim area, and Sunnis will be out for revenge. Security sources tell us the LAF and Internal Security Forces were immediately moved to the area to help maintain the calm. 150 Sunni

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gathered near the bomb site following the explosion, but no violence was reported. However, March 14 leader Hariri will not be able to maintain his own leadership credibility if he continues to tell his followers to turn the other cheek. As of this writing, Hariri has been able to keep his followers in check, although anti-Shia, anti-Syrian, and anti-Nasrallah comments were reported from Sunni neighborhoods last night.

17. (C) In addition, Sunni anger could translate into Sunni solidarity with Sunni militias, making it more difficult for the LAF to pursue its offensive against Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr al-Barid camp. If Beirut were to erupt into panic (and already we have noted visibly decreased traffic and numerous school closings, both signs the Lebanese are staying close to home), it is quite probable the GOL would call back some of the LAF's best commandos from Nahr al-Barid. Such a move would provide those who oppose the LAF's offensive in Nahr al-Barid with a convenient excuse to halt the operations. Further, pro-Syrian politicians no doubt would use the opportunity to blame the USG for not providing the "right" kind of military equipment, leaving the LAF no choice but to withdraw.

18. (C) Our March 14 and GOL contacts are watching how the international community reacts and what actions we take in response to Eido's killing. For their part, they have already authorized PM Siniora to request the UN to extend UNIIIC investigative assistance to the Eido assassination, and they are considering how to promote by-elections to replace the vacant March 14 seats despite Emile Lahoud's opposition. In the immediate aftermath of Eido's killing, we detect as well as lessening of the already tepid enthusiasm for the French dialogue proposal and a National Unity Cabinet.

FELTMAN